



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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ASSAULTS ON CONSERVATION OFFICERS DOCUMENTED IN FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE REPORT

Law enforcement can be more hazardous in the woods than on city streets.

Chief of the Law Enforcement Division of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Clark Bavin said recent studies show that assaults on wildlife officers are nine times more likely to be fatal than those on other law enforcement personnel. In addition, four out of five people who assault wildlife officers are carrying firearms, as opposed to one in five for their urban counterparts.

In its study, the Service compiled information concerning assaults on conservation officers during 1987. The report found there were 8,997 conservation officers employed by state and territorial wildlife agencies and 186 special agents working for the Service.

During the year, there were 128 assaults on conservation officers. Twenty-eight of those assaults (or 22 percent) resulted in injuries. Two of the injured state officers died--one in Kentucky and one in Florida. Only one of the assaults was against a Federal agent. This nets a nationwide assault rate of 1.4 percent and means that one out of every 72 officers was assaulted.

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The Service compiled the report after receiving a request to do so from the Law Enforcement Committee of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Since 1981, similar data have been prepared by several different agencies and organizations. During that period, there was an average of 127 assaults each year, with a high of 168 in 1983 and a low of 66 in 1986.

For the purposes of the report, the Service defined an assault as, ". . . an intentional and unlawful offer of corporal injury to the officer by force . . . under such circumstances that the officers fear they are in imminent peril, coupled with apparent present ability to execute such a threat unless it is prevented. Battery is not necessary but mere idle threats are not to be recorded."

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle said, "This report indicates too many state and Federal wildlife law enforcement personnel are exposed to harm's way in performing their duties. Day in and day out, a wildlife officer must deal with armed citizens in remote areas. With nearly 16 million hunters roaming the woods and fields each year, it is fortunate that there were only 128 assaults."

During the study year, Virginia recorded the highest assault rate with 4.9 percent. Utah ranked second with 3.8 percent, followed by Washington and Alaska with 3.7 percent.

The assailants' most frequent weapon was the body. Hands, fists, and feet were used in 35 percent of the assaults. Firearms came second and played a part in 31 percent of the incidents.

The most common situation, which accounted for 37 percent of the assaults on wildlife officers, was that of confronting a violator without a warrant. The second and third most common circumstances were routine fishing and hunting license checks. These accounted for rates of 12 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

And finally, the report showed that the number of assaults on uniformed officers working alone and those assisted by another officer were divided about equally.